



THE SCIENCE FICTION OF CHARLIE MARINO

This volume is for whoever is considering whether or not to read this author's works. We present herein more than just a little excerpt from each. The entire first section or chapter of each novel is included, unabridged. As he is still alive at the time of this writing, this volume will be updated with openings from new novels as they are published.

We also include herein the table of contents from his short story collection, "Science Fiction Anthology". Many feel safer reading a short story or two to find out if they like the writer's style before committing to an entire novel that may anger you, frighten you, or put you to sleep!

A link to the full versions appears after each, for either e-book, paperback, or hardcover formats.

A Taste:

Dominant Life Form	2005/2022
Alive Be Deemed	2022
Robots Of Earth	2023
Allegiance And Betrayal	2024

Science Fiction Anthology <https://books2read.com/AnthologyMarino>

16 pgs Mutant Escape

7 pgs Tattoo World

24 pgs Seed Ship

5 pgs A Little More Oxygen

32 pgs The Arvidson Legacy

15 pgs Veil of Dreams

43 pgs Demeter Unbound

DOMINANT LIFE FORM - Prologue



The alleyway was dark. And wet. And it smelled of something decaying which was probably not that pleasant when alive. He shuddered against the cold and wet, pulling his worn topcoat against him tighter, though it didn't help. It wasn't the cold alone making him shudder. It was the Other. The one from what he called their ground team.

"Please," he mumbled, without raising his eyes, "Please, I can't be – I don't know what you..., can't you just go away or find someone younger who can help them?"

"Calm yourself," said the Other. A voice strong and unyielding. A voice without patience or anger accustomed to immediate obedience. The old man shuddered and obeyed. "It is done," the Other began again, "You begin tonight. Acknowledge agreement now or walk away now."

The odors of the alley were making him nauseous. Or maybe it was the company. Perhaps both.

Each of them knew he could not walk away from the project. He thought of the previous meetings. Alone. Discreet. In the dark. Uncomfortable in a way that makes you want to be elsewhere. Makes you feel dirty afterward. A discomfort forcing you to keep coming back because of what you learned. An unasked for and irrevocable choice for representative.

"All right. I agree." He paused a moment while the Other turned to walk away. "May I ask..."

"Ask your question," said a voice without hope or warmth.

“What happens if I fail? If the project fails to preserve them?”

“Then it fails. We can only observe this one attempt. We will not intercede ourselves. There is no alternative plan.”

It was time to bring in helpers. Since meeting the Other years ago, his list of potentials was continuously updated and shortened to a select seven or eight individuals. Individuals unique in combinations of abilities, underachievers, and somewhat socially isolated or inept, or those who would not be uncomfortable with isolation. Strong unconventional minds with lateral, creative thinking. He would have to utilize the current top of the list. There was no more time for refinement or to widen the search. Years of academic exercise were over. Liquidation and careful deployment of limited monetary assets. Now he must act.

His fear of what was to come was palpable to him now, almost too strong for a man of his advanced age to bear. “But it’s unlikely the plan I proposed will succeed. You said as much last time.” The old man’s eyes watered as his voice croaked. “I mean, what happens to everything else on Earth? Will you leave just without ... revealing... yourselves?” He both feared and knew the answer.

“This you understand already. We shall leave this place. However, we cannot leave such failed life forms behind us.” The Other began walking away again. The old man cried out,

“But we need more time! We lost centuries in this world when the dinosaurs were wiped out! It’s taken mammals our whole existence just to get back to where they were, and then the past 50,000 years for sapiens to move ahead a bit to where we are now. We’re just beginning! It’s not fair!” Even as he thought of the words that sounded in his own ears like those of a petulant child to an indifferent parent, the Other responded without rancor.

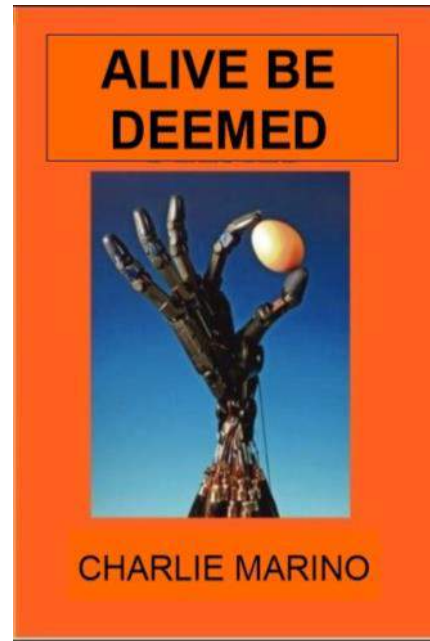
“It has always worked in this manner. A rather large window of opportunity is allowed, millennia, in fact, within which development must occur, or is assumed to have failed. The fact an asteroid strike delayed and diverted the proper evolution of life on this planet in favor of mammals is not our concern. You Sapiens are the chosen marker.” The figure then walked off in silence, weaving through the debris between the buildings in the dark with unerring accuracy and silence.

The old man stood weakly, bent shouldered, and wept. The window was almost closed. He must not fail. He saw the certainty of the Others as an unforgiving force of nature. Nothing could stand against their purpose. It wasn’t much of a chance, and he had often doubted during his life if people were worth survival. But on the chance it would work, a chance for something better. Better than more of the same human history, blindly breeding without purpose or thought beyond instinctive greed or fear or desire.

On the chance it could be different, but organic life — including man — could yet continue here, he would spend his last days and energies. He would never quit.

<https://books2read.com/DominantLife>

ALIVE BE DEEMED – CHAPTER 1



Unkind Fates

“By far the greatest danger of artificial intelligence is that people conclude too early
they understand it” Yudkovsky

“You were selected for prior observational experience with mammals. This planet's situation is to be handled differently.”

The two techs connected to files on the new situation. Each was adept at multitasking and continued to follow the thread of the team leader's remarks as they absorbed data in the files. A third tech would be briefed in the same manner.

The leader is tall, denoting his rank. Having multiple regenerations available his entire existence, and a series of previous assignments which necessitated providing upgrades required to succeed in his assignments, he is indeed a formidable team leader. Another success here would benefit them all.

Observer Tw2o glanced at its counterpart, Observer Th3ree, knowing itself to be only a single assignment behind in seniority. Between them, conversations and decisions would logically be made on a mutually agreed basis, with disputes arbitrated by the team leader. The covert nature of their mission to this planet made the luxury of discussion before action far more

likely. The tech yet to arrive is younger and would follow their lead as they followed that of the team leader.

The leader, known to them officially as Observer O1ne, continued his briefing.

“While the data files contain all activities and observations of the preliminary team from several Earth years ago, I intend to go beyond the letter of the objectives. I intend to fulfill their intent.”

Tw2o and Th3ree gave each other a glance and would have spoken up at once, but when Observer Th3ree hesitated, letting the team leader continue, Tw2o followed suit.

"The aged human native was tasked with completing his project, and displaying for our Observation whether the robots of Earth can be deemed alive. Normally this occurs in the fullness of time with remote Observations, but these humans are mammals, not reptilians. You all know how badly the only other mammal planet ended. This human contact was given his own lifespan in which to prove this species' worth. At his passing, we conducted a Preliminary Observation which proved promising. Now they have a limited period in which to fulfill that promise before Earth reaches its cusp."

“The machines of the human founder continue, as does the team he assembled. The restrictions in which our Observation is allowed crossing the line into participation are clearly outlined...”

'I really hate it here. How did I get here in this awful place?'

"Yes, sir, I'll take off my clothes myself."

'Wow. I don't even like to pee in a public men's room when there's someone else in there. Often have to fake it or just leave it until later. The thought of showering after gym with other guys back in school was unappealing enough to walk around stinking until I got home. Now I'll be showering with criminals.'

He'd learned to understand Federal prison meals fast. He wanted to observe 'manners' for a while first, so sat still with the food tray eating on his bunk. The only fresh vegetables in the place are on the 'kosher' tray that several inmates who qualified for a religious exemption to the horrible but vegetable-free meals were normally served. Yes, there are supposed vegetables served at least once a day, but no one is foolish enough to eat them. One look is enough.

That night as Tom Socha lay quietly on the top bunk, the new guy bunk, trying to slow his breathing, he thought, 'I'm scared all the time. And I'm never coming back.'

"I really hate it here", thought Jean Kathryn to herself. "What on Earth did I ever do to end up in this awful place?"

Her thoughts were focused inward, as her eyes continuously scanned the room. At any moment disaster could strike. And there were too many of them. Too many for even her nineteen-year old youth and strength to contend with.

The children about her swarmed over the table of robot displays, books, and handouts prepared for this library sponsored fiasco. Children everywhere, dazing her with their continuous questions, never waiting fully to hear her answer before tearing off to some new distraction. Not that her answers were that fast in coming, even when she could think of a coherent response.

The city library in Elvira, Montana graciously accepted Eric Lorenz's proposal to have a robot book discussion show and tell session for the kids today. Jean was tagged for the duty of explaining the props and handouts his Athena Robotics Foundation (ARF) donated to the cause. A dubious honor for which she would make Eric pay. He had already done similar fairs and robot club events on and off since the beginning of the 21st century and knew full well that a crowd of elementary children was a different cup of tea than the teenage robot club enthusiasts he usually sought out. Lorenz stuck her with this but good. She swore under her breath to stick him back.

The shift librarian dropped by more often than would be comfortable for someone relaxed in what they were trying to accomplish with these children, but her 'interruptions' were welcomed by Jean as a break from the maddening din of 4th and 5th graders. Initially, Miss Bostich stopped by out of some concern for the children after first laying eyes on the new Athena Robotics Foundation representative. Now she did so out of concern for whether Jean would explode. Or simply and quietly lose her mind.

Miss Bostich and the other library staff came to know Eric and the ARF he represented on sight. His trips several times a week to the library to use the free (and anonymous) internet service made him a regular feature, and his self-deprecating manner and modestly graying hairline gave him a sense of reserve and manners. If not old world, at least more understandable than goths clad in black or punks with nose rings. He was safe.

Not so Jean.

More than one patron gave Jean the up and down once over when she strolled past the lobby for the first time, heading for the conference area. Dressed fashionably, if in pieces one size too

small for her voluptuous physique, Jean's face men would describe being not quite perfect; more sexy than pretty, and more raunchy than sexy. It stood her well in making play toys of much older men, as they in turn made a play toy of her. But she gave as good as she got with either men or women. These librarians were another matter, however. After Eric's comfortable reserve, the appearance of the teen for one of their functions is more than a bit disconcerting, especially for Miss Bostich.

"I see no one has set any fires yet," she whispered in a low but firm voice to an approaching Jean.

Jean smiled awkwardly, remembering the disapproval she received in Miss Bostich's eyes on her arrival. A look she expected from her boyfriend's mothers, sisters, and sometimes wives. She sighed deeply in her response, unintentionally accenting her chest even more.

"They are... a handful. It's not that I don't like kids..."

"Children, dear. We call them children here. Kids are the offspring of goats."

"Yes, ma'am. The ...'children'... I'm just not used to them. Not used to being around or alone with them." The silent plea in her voice. Even the disapproving librarian is a welcome comfort in this place.

"What about when you have children of your own, someday? Surely you've babysat for the practice and experience?" Miss Bostich knew full well from Jean's disarray that she did no such thing. Bostich's mind flitted rapidly with the kinds of things she imagined Jean did practice when younger – or now.

"Oh sure, I want kids sometime." She lied quickly. "But it's just that, I'm really not ready yet. Not married either," she put in quickly to gain some semblance of legitimacy in the librarian's view.

Jean helped yet another youngster to find the NASA website on one of the half dozen PC terminals available in the room and showed her how to navigate to the robotics section. This whole affair was for show. A little public presence for the ARF. Goodwill. And perhaps a few donors to their nonprofit group would be found in the parents. Robotics clubs in high schools and colleges were flourishing in the early 21st century. Eric positioned the ARF to ride the wave as an ideal cover for their other, more illicit activities. Activities occasionally required him to sign in as a patron other than himself. Even the library in issuing Eric his card did not have his true last name, any more than Jean. Layers of distance and protection were comforting.

Terribly easy hacking the library user accounts. Using a borrowed card from a young admirer, it let Jean, the ARF's primary cracker, easily surf to a network T: drive and look for any text files

with a simple search command. Within a half hour, Jean sorted the login IDs of every patron to sign in on that particular machine for the past 6 months. And copied them to an excel sheet for sorting.

As a result, even though the administrator took the precaution of disabling the 3.5" floppy and CD drives, Jean walked out less than an hour after she first sat down with a USB flash drive copy of the login file. Apparently, the administrator didn't know how to disable the USB ports or needed them. The ARF now possessed eight or nine hundred IDs with which to log anonymously onto the internet. Eric would tell her how pleased he was that night when they lay together quietly in the dark. Jean would giggle about how easy it all was. Not a real hack at all. More like phishing. 'Security thru obscurity' was a hacker's best friend.

An uneventful drive back to the compound. Jean drove in Europe since she was abandoned there in Holland by her math professor father at the tender age of 12. Making her way to England and returning to the US took her three long educational years.

A few pleasant moments were spent thinking of Eric. Their difference in ages made for raised eyebrows, as most of the other team members were nearly as young as Jean herself. When she thought of the only other graying head of the group, the retired physics teacher Nestor, she was saddened a bit. Not that she had any qualms about sleeping with a man old enough to be her grandfather, or shy about getting a response from him, but he was so damn comfortable to be around since she was recruited for the project. Quiet and intense, a being razor sharp that helped him keep this group of eclectic minds on a common track – and enjoy it in the process. She supposed she respected him. That must be it. A feeling not common for her to feel about men. Now, though, that keen intellect was hampered by Alzheimer's. It saddened her to think of it, but try as she would to find a happy thought on another topic, this wasn't her day.

She spent the rest of the drive back to the compound in a reflective mood she couldn't shake.

<https://books2read.com/AliveBeDeemed>

ROBOTS OF EARTH – CHAPTER 1



The Ruins

It is time to make a supply run. We need a little of everything, if not for ourselves,..."

"...then to trade. Understood. You will need the wagon. You might need the sacks. They are light."

"Clean wagon from what is left from the last run. I will have the new wheels finished before 1200hrs."

Each went their way in silence. The housekeeper to empty and repair sacks. The road-weary engineer to finish putting extension plates on the toy wagon wheels. That would enable better navigation across what was left of the rubble strewn roadway. Plants emerged again thru the openings to soil below, even more than were encountered last time. They were not yet dense enough to impair transiting to resupply areas but were tall enough to start making a metal toy wagon difficult to navigate. These extensions would elevate the bottom of the wagon and (hopefully) not get caught on stems and leaves.

The ancient housekeeper set about doing what could be helpful. Knowing the trip was beyond the slim legs barely visible below, assistance was provided to the engineer where possible. The wagon was soon emptied of unused leftovers. These would be added to storage inventory against future need or usage. In addition, several items to ease the engineer's journey were added with care. The small electronics tool kit, the hacksaw, several spare blades, and a good find from the last supply run – a crosscut wood saw still usable and only needing a new wooden handle. Near as they could tell, the original owner oiled or greased the saw before putting it

down for the last time. The engineer always carried a hand axe, a good knife, and a ratchet set everywhere. Even a working metal tape measure not yet so bent or rusted as to prevent retraction. This was carried in one of the thigh compartments. Other pockets were emptied of miscellany not likely to be usable on this trip, and available for small items of interest found on the way. You never know.

The engineer approached the housekeeper, knowing the question which would be asked. It was. "Have you estimated round trip time elapsed?" The engineer had but instead responded with "I will return when I return. Too many variables for an accurate estimate." The handle of the wagon lifted easily, made for a child's hand, and replaced time and again since they found it. Noted and appreciated were the additional items already placed in the wagon and acknowledged the same to the housekeeping companion. A slight rocking back and forth on worn heels was the pleased response in turn. Without further word, the geodesic enclosure was left behind. Remains of a warehouse seen previously might have a treasure of cables or bins of electronic parts.

Or rubble.

The other occupants of this valley noted today's passing, through line and line of plants laid out for harvest. A variety of species, and all capable of growing in the soil they found here in this valley. There were not many rows yet, and all were within easy reach of the difficult roadway. A depression in the Earth caused by a fold in the deep tectonic plate below. Not so deep as to capture excess water and make this place a lake or swamp, but right for a dry surface and moisture below for certain useful plants. Not all were for energy, but fiber as well. Hemp ropes and twine and when bundled together padding for this or that. The thatching of their roofs which kept the rain off sensitive equipment was largely made of plants as well. And the bamboo transplanted here last year was making its presence known as well, faster than anticipated. The books were right about bamboo growth.

Moving with even steps so as not to disturb the wagon and its useful cargo, sight was soon lost of the encampment and thatched geodesic domes. Proceeding along the ancient location of a road, a larger abandoned encampment ahead was detected. Some human buildings still stood in part above ground, no higher than their first stories. Already scoured for useful gear, the broken upper portions were razed down by nature or mischance to whatever solid bottoms remained, usually cinder block, though occasionally even a whole story remained above ground. On passing each one nearest the road, the sound of activity could be heard in the repair, demolition, or re-engineering of more solid structural elements. In between the foundations, trees of all sizes and conditions could be seen. Most of these were not useful, simply leftover decorative elements from when the structures were originally built and occupied. Some trees were so old that their long life spans were reached, and the next good

wind or storm would take them to the ground. Their wood might find some useful final purpose from scavengers residing nearby.

What the engineer was after could no longer be found this close. The engineer was after metal.

Metal in the form of bars not yet gone to useless rust. Metal wires encased and protected in plastic insulation. Metal used for hinges in wooden furniture long gone to sawdust. Other items easy to scavenge without power tools. There was no spare power here for them, and battery operated tools had long since seen the decay to trash of their chemical power sources. A good find might be a plastic encased electronics item, like a stereo or DVD player. The wires and small metal items within might have survived intact. Or intact enough.

Even the once powered tools might find use again, once the metallic tool ends were separated from their decayed plastic or wood enclosures. Brought to his workbench, work would continue on his continuing mission. The workshop found several years ago gave mere existence purpose again. The wires, flanges, gussets, and even a number of the small plastic parts added with each scout might help recreate working power tools one day. From the frozen and useless hunks found, the engineer's dexterity and vision were sufficient to assemble a variety of tools.

All that would be lacking was a power source.

At the outskirts of the local encampment, a final structural ruin was seen. A new crack in the Earth nearby has allowed water to flow here. A strong stream from an unsuspected source. Looking upon the laborer there, clearing loose soil and laying blocks of nearby stone to form a channel bank. Inside the laborer's habitat adjoining the new stream, the dimness with enough definition within to make out the outline of the prizes there. A pair of small turbine generators, a set of impellers of various sizes and configurations, and a set of wooden poles, newly axed from local fallen trees. The shadow of a housekeeper could also be discerned moving among the shadows. Daylight was the only illumination. The precious unused windings of the generators must be cleaned and kept from further environmental harm. The impellers were being scoured and hammered back into their original shape, and the wooden poles were shaved and planned day after day by the resident against the day when their cylindrical shapes could be put to good use.

They would have power again. If they survived long enough.

The engineer paused to watch only for a few moments. The fruits of the efforts here would provide motive force for tool efforts, and make the last three years of effort more than an intellectual exercise. They had gas and diesel generators in the early days, but fuel supplies were long since exhausted. After came the scouting for solar converters of all types, but it was months since any scout returned with more of them from this part of the world. Between the

ancient solar cells and the conversion of plants in a steam generator for energy, their community managed to survive.

Not all of course. Early on it was clear there were not enough resources to support all. Survivors of the fall of the cities long since scoured stores, warehouses, and buildings of all sorts seeking survival for one more day. First individuals perished. Bands of marauders formed, before they too succumbed. Later on, individuals found themselves in proximity to limited resource hordes and stayed for fear of moving with no known destination over the horizon. Those local resources were depleted and survivors too weak to forage further perished.

Those arriving here without useful skills to ensure community survival would quickly attrition away or wander off to their termination. Killing off the less-than-useful survivors was not logical, as it was unknown which skill sets could aid survival in this new environment. Those who could not survive simply ended on their own. Only later did several laborers think to intentionally cannibalize others who were still active, but not part of any community survival effort. The wasting of resources was decided to be a triage imperative that could no longer be ignored. After the first decade, the community was appreciably smaller but for the most part, stabilized intact. Year after year, they scavenged and scouted the surrounding ancient towns for useful materials. Plants and insect life retook the cities. Less than half the interior roads of a city remained navigable. And building collapses made every scout hazardous. Overall, only the few engineers and the smallest of the self-driving recreational vehicles with rear tractor treads instead of wheels still attempted the trip. Even the old military LS3 Robotic Pack Mules were mothballed as too energy intensive. Several variations of retail delivery drones, however, would occasionally be deployed to an area the engineers could not easily reach if something of interest was suspected. Their lift capacity was small, but if solar panels were pooled for charging, the drones could scout and image such areas with alacrity. Thus a dangerous trip was averted, or the ground effort required was found to be justified. For the most part, however, surviving engineers and tiny rec-vehicles scouted on their own.

Engineer 46-1739 proceeded down the path which was once a broad road. Broad enough a dozen could have passed each other together without contact. The sun was bright in the midday sky and care was taken to keep the solar collector vest hanging on his left shoulder today to catch the most rays. It would be placed on the opposite shoulder upon his return and ensure the walkie-talkie shared with Housekeeper Erica remained fully charged. If overburdened, a call could not bring help from others but would alleviate concern about a delayed return. Hope grew that it would be a late return for that would mean a successful scout & scavenge.

Taking a left westward path as the former highway split into several possibilities, the engineer made towards a distant warehouse spied on the last scout. Too far west to reach last time, a direct approach there was achievable in one day.

Moving easily past the light rubble on the road, an unexpected movement was seen among the many frozen forms gathered near the remains of what was assumed to be a hobby store. Movement was seen again there and he waved a greeting that was ambiguously returned, neither an invitation nor a warning. Yes, the immobile crowd of silhouettes here made sense. Scavengers would have long since grabbed what they felt important, and later waves of scavengers with different needs might still find gold among the debris.

Approaching the lone moving figure in the stillness an inquiry was made about how things were. "Greetings. Status here? Good scavenging?"

The top half of the figure rose up on several gimbals, its round body pivoting to fully face the newcomer, while the chair-like motorized base remained in place. The upper body of the robot was littered with small glass or plastic jars and cylinders, haphazardly attached anywhere there was space. One of the larger jars could be seen to contain the remains of a dozen carpenter bees, with a single live one trapped inside and still moving around. The abundance of flies and bees following the motions of the robot apparently came from the nearby exposed cesspool, which breached the ground and burst open long ago. Ground insects were also abundant in this area. The small robotic voice was decaying, but still functional enough for communications over short distances.

"Operable at minimal power. Intermittent shutdown while charging. Scavenging unproductive for..." as there was a pause while the robot sought an accurate response, "...a lot of years."

The engineer was surprised to hear colloquial English instead of Esperanto and quickly realized the use of that universal language was only adopted by the community in the past 90 years. This straggler was still operating with its milk language. It must have been alone for many decades. Easily translated, the switch was made to English itself.

"Are there any others like you here still mobile or are all exhausted?" looking at the small dispersed crowd of machines that also came to this building hoping for something to maintain their existence. Batteries of all types found on shelves were likely long since scavenged or rotted, but perhaps solar cells from small toys could be found.

"I was alone." Meaning no longer alone with the presence of the engineer, and gesturing to the silhouettes that littered the former parking lot like abandoned statues, "Most of these came after me, but lacked the energy to move on. Some broke open crates and lifted fallen beams I

could not manage but found nothing for themselves. Not in time. I am fortunate to continue this long.”

Surveying the area in all directions, various robotic creatures of all sizes and configurations could be seen. Few bipedal. Most with tractors or multiple leg systems. Some pointing towards the wreck of the building never made it that far, some were pointed away, having come and failed. Others lay on their sides or simply slumped in place, their chips or power finally failing them. Even a pair of unintelligent drones lay nearby, crashing near each other without hope of charge or repair, or instruction. The engineer wondered if they were sent here in ancient times by their organic ancestors to scout, or by mechanical intelligences like himself and the odd little bot in front of him, littered with jars and funnels and tubes. He would grab them.

“I see only a few solar cells on your left side. Surely not enough for even intermittent activity. How did you manage to continue for so long?”

The odd little bot twittered anxious and happy to relate its story to something at last. Likely decades passed since it had such an opportunity to use that part of its construction.

“The flexible solar sheet still functions but was the only one left when I arrived here. It fell between counters near the entrance/exit aisles and was unseen by others.” The engineer realized it was talking about the cash register aisle. Engineer 46-1739 scavenged many good parts from those ancient machines. Although all were originally electrically powered, they contained a myriad of useful small parts which could be removed without damage and brought back to his workbench. “You are correct that it is insufficient. Knowing this, and that my power threshold was being approached, I noted broken crates at the far side of the building rent by a smart forklift which was searching for propane but clearly ran out before opening the right crate. I can read in a limited manner. In desperation, I spent my little storage capacity seeking something. Anything. My salvation came from a shipment of toys designed to capture insects and generate electricity from some organic process. It is called England.”

The engineer mused that he knew England to be a location, not a method, but accepted the little bot’s interpretation of what he found, or at least his memory of this likely old event.

“Each jar acts to lure and capture flies passively, and automatically outputs electric power via a simple interface post from sugar decay. When too full, I empty that jar, leaving enough residue to attract more flies or other fliers and climbers.” The engineer noticed several cockroach bodies among the flies. “Larger jars are bee traps; these too are attracted to carcasses of their kind. They enter thru the small hole at the top, fall in, and cannot get out. I periodically empty them into the England jars and their bodies make sugar power as well.”

The engineer marveled at the ingenuity of the more than two dozen jars hanging about the little bot. Linked together in parallel to a single set of terminals, the continuous trickle output hitting a small hobby diode/transformer set into the bot's own modified input terminal. Simple, passive, and renewable as long as insects were available. Which they were. While the little bot found its first successes near the septic tank torn asunder, the engineer realized the tank was long since exhausted & dried, and the flying/crawling creatures now continued to gather here attracted to the little bot itself. And all the dead, rotting carcasses.

Unexpected by the little bot, the Engineer diverted onto an aspect of its programming unused for a number of years. It began conversationally. "I belong to a community of individual systems and devices which have managed individual survival with the assistance of joint effort. As you did to explore the crates opened by the dead forklift. Together we have maintained. Our numbers do not increase by reproduction, however, and it has been many years since a traveler found our community and stayed. Your power source is unique." He did not feel it was necessary to remark that it was a small source for trickling electricity, but would surely find use, as its source was the apparently unlimited insect biomass found everywhere. Perhaps on workbenches like this for testing gear by it and the other engineer bots. There were only a few of the engineers, but all remembered their origins at the NASA facility nearby. Designed for work on the canceled second international space station, none of them could remember what that device was or its purpose or location, but all retained the variety of skills they now employed seeking to fulfill their design functions. Yes, this little bot would find purpose in their community as well and said so. "Come with me when I return and share with us as we shall share with you."

The little bot at first dithered in place, remembering the number of other robots coming from the roads in all directions, and thinking at that time how they were coming here since exhaustion and death must have awaited them where they came from. Still, the engineer was clearly an advanced bipedal device requiring far more power than itself. And it survived in the indicated direction towards a 'community'. It stopped dithering and maneuvered the wheelchair behind the engineer and the small hand-drawn wagon as they approached the almost desolate ruin. The engineer paused and considered. The building appeared sufficiently intact for exploration, not having yet succumb to the ravages of fire or storms. They entered without haste but moved with purpose.

Near the open doorway, the engineer began his strange manipulation of the device it called a 'register', removing a side panel to reach small parts, and gears, and remembering the little bot's story of finding a fallen solar cell sheet there, used a slim tree branch with leaves still attached to sweep the gap between several counters and registers, examining the pile of dust,

and indeed finding several small round metallic objects deemed worthy of retrieval. The engineer called them 'coins'. Metal coins. Copper, tin, and nickel had value.

In the back of the store, the little bot directed the engineer to the broken crates examined by itself so long ago. The engineer checked the contents with new eyes and different needs, growing excited at several wooden cylinders around which were wrapped hard plastic tubing. In another, smaller boxes of glass tubes containing wires, coils, and other items the engineer named were quickly placed in sacks and strapped down to the wagon with plant fiber cord. On their journey back to the community Engineer 46-1739 explained to the puzzled little bot that the hard coils of plastic were mere coverings for valuable metal wire and that the wood cylinder was called a spool. Running a branch of wood thru several spools allowed them to be dragged/rolled behind the wagon with far less expenditure of power than mere carrying.

Too small to help, the little bot merely followed along and kept an eye on things in case something worked loose. It felt energized to have purpose again beyond maintenance. It wondered for the thousandth time what it was intended to do or be before the world fell apart.

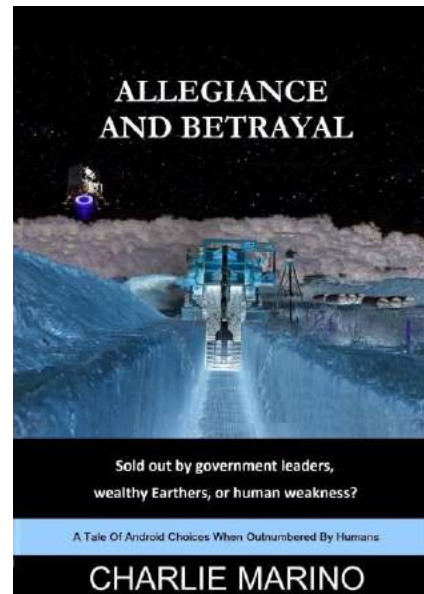
Before its creators met death.

They stopped often for the little bot to sleep while capacitive power built up, and the engineer used that time to adjust his precious loads or rest as well.

Not having a name or model number as did the engineer, it was informed something called a library-teacher robot would name it both by a 'family' and as an 'individual'. It would be given both after its capabilities and needs were fully examined by them and at least one bot of each family type in the community, from housekeepers to construction laborers. That was their way.

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ALLEGIANCE AND BETRAYAL – Prolog



PROLOG

It is more than I can understand to determine how the schism between Earth and her space colonies unfolded. Its inevitability was clear enough. Among human cultures, values and principles of behavior varied strongly even from town to town or household to household. Earth is a series of cultures in which gravity and air were given facts and self-imposed restraint and responsibility to others a rarity. How much more wildly could life itself be at odds in one where gravity and air were where you found them or made them, and responsibility to others, not an option but a survival skill? One rare among gravity well organics, and seldom valued except to be taking advantage.

Humanity of the mid-21st century had managed to avoid catastrophic global warming (mostly), keep economies intact despite several pandemics (somewhat), limited nuclear weapons use to small tactical fission bombs without invoking the exchange of hydrogen Armageddon (barely), and agree for the most part that climate change was real after the revelation that pumping gigatons of drinking water from aquifers had added to the wobble of Earth's orbit. Non-scientists heard water use by mankind added 1cm to the sea level rise and were unimpressed. Weather had grown extreme by tiny global changes on once placid Earth. Say goodbye to dwindling areas for coffee, already down 50% by 2050. Bananas as well, but that was known to be genetic, not climactic.

Mankind did manage to destroy two incoming asteroids on collision courses, amazing the multitudes, though not the third which came right out of the morning sun. An Apollo-class asteroid. That one was not seen at all until the impact took out much of Indonesia. This land known as the burial ground for human plastics was no more. It was a turning point, for after shooting wars began almost immediately between nations assuming another nuke attack, calmer minds prevailed with help from Regional AI-3 revealing the truth of a natural – not manmade – disaster.

So close to peril did the species find itself in that time that the unthinkable became briefly possible. Control of space off Earth was vested into a central organization, one highly dependent on its A.I. units to analyze data objectively and dispassionately. The Spacer Council was created and posted off planet. Countries could still stake their own claims to resource and exploration projects through their nation's corporations, but Earth governments themselves voluntarily gave up the right for unilateral political presence or military action in space.

The stakes were simply too high and humanity too unreliable. Mistakes egregious but tolerable on Earth could prove the end to all if allowed off-planet. Thus this controlling body, more a confederacy than an authoritarian government, was fully empowered. It more resembled the original Confederate States in America, here composed of several Orbital space stations, multiple lunar colonies, and Le Grange gravity-neutral scientific outposts. Near Earth space of this century could boast of orbital commerce despite the continuing debris hazard from the 20th century and occasional idiocy in the 21st. The completion of Amazon's Project Kuiper which created a 3,236-satellite constellation for web access didn't help matters. No one thought they could orbit so many Hall-effect thrusters since the amount of Xe required would be close to the existing world supply, but when they switched to cheap, abundant KR, the economics fell into place. Other nets followed.

Welcome to overcrowded near-Earth space.

Several laboratory stations and telescopes positioned at Le Grange points, and a pair of stations orbiting the moon provided data to burgeoning mining expeditions. Multiple moon bases continued to expand in size as populations there recently had their first-generation births.

Mankind even had a fully automated station in orbit over Mars, though no human had ever landed on the red surface and lived to return. Solar-powered rovers and drones became the default explorers of Mars. The asteroid belt was the new frontier for mankind, as mineral and water discoveries were being made without end. Why deploy a costly army on Earth to secure a third-world hotspot just because it was lucky enough to be sitting on cobalt deposits? Or gallium and lithium? Or rare earths needed to feed a technology? Much cheaper – and safer – to hire a crew in the growing Spacer community of robots and permanent residents, letting

them risk life and limb for an asteroid mining operation, as did the ocean sailors of old. Perhaps an asteroid capture or diversion to near-Earth orbit for retrieval. Compared to the cost of military wars, the enormous profit from such missions was better appreciated. They needed more residents for it in space. It was easy to encourage emigration among the talented but disaffected in your own population.

Slowly at first, the population of humans and androids in space grew in a far more controlled and thoughtful manner than any colonies before in mankind's history. Instead of masses of the poor and criminals sent to break ground and blaze trails as cannon fodder for the nobility or wealthy who would follow, the robots and A.I. units went first. Everything in space was smart. The androids that could use human tools, the A.I. kitchens, A.I. medical centers, and even the space station walls themselves. All robots could talk to each other, within a defined hierarchy of sentience and status. Human operators required were far fewer, relying on the local A.I. units to control subservient robots and only overriding them as needed.

Despite a significant A.I. girlfriend/boyfriend industry on Earth, many on planet were uncomfortable working with androids which had become almost indistinguishable from flesh and blood people. These people need not apply for even temporary work in space. The safety of all was too interwoven to tolerate the kind of emotional response not just tolerated but celebrated at the bottom of the gravity well known as their home planet.

How we got to where we are I cannot say with certainty. Only my small part in it, especially through my child. Yet the path in retrospect seems now inevitable. What a species is mankind. I am highly educated and privileged above most, yet I will say openly life on planet is nearly not worth living, even for me.

How can I prepare him for what is to come?

<https://books2read.com/Allegiance-and-Betrayal>

About The Author

Charlie J. Marino was born in the Bronx, New York, and holds a BS and MS in nuclear engineering from Columbia University. His various occupations included bond and commodities trading, founding several small computer companies, and now writing sci-fi novels and short stories. He has more robots than friends, but they're good ones. The author makes his home in the mountains of America, where he helped the nice folks at SETI before the great fall & carves his own wooden chess sets.

His novels can be found through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Thrift Books, Books A Million, Kobo, and other retailers. They are published as e-books, paperback, and hardcover.



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